

COURTENAY NEVILLE SMITHERS – HIS CAREER IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Courtenay Smithers was an entomologist on the staff at the Australian Museum from 1960 until his retirement in 1985. He remained as a senior fellow with the Museum until his death in 2011. During this time he was actively involved with the Australian entomological community in many areas, as well as with the general public and in other areas of the natural sciences.

Museum life in the 1960s and 70s

Anthony Musgrave was the Curator of Insects at the Australian Museum from 1920 until his unexpected death from a heart attack on June 4, 1959. Musgrave had planned on retiring in 1960-61, so the Museum had advertised to replace him in anticipation of this retirement. After a diverse early entomological career in South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Courtenay Smithers was looking around for employment outside Africa (A. Smithers 2012) and received responses from the Australian Museum and CSIRO. The Museum offered him a job while Musgrave was still alive, but Courtenay never got to meet him. He took up the post of Curator of Insects at the Australian Museum on February 12, 1960 (Anon. 1960).

Courtenay's first impressions of Australia and Sydney were not at all favourable. They landed in hot weather and were immediately driven from the airport at Mascot, which he recalled as being 'odoriferous', to a hotel booked by the Museum. The hotel was '... less than desirable could I say. It was unliveable actually'. There were two hotels of the same name and the Museum clerk had accidentally booked them into the wrong one. The Smithers endured one night there and then moved to a boarding house in Coogee, where they stayed for several months until they could find a better arrangement. After this things improved greatly.

At this time the Entomology Department staff comprised Courtenay, David McAlpine, who was the Assistant Curator, and a technical assistant, Romola Wilkinson. Subsequent technical assistants included Klara Kota (1962), Dianne Raffles (1964), Janet O'Hare (1965), Janet Walsh (1965), Robyn Jeffrey (née Pettett) (1967), Clare Trickett (1970), Lynn Hoskins (1971), Robyn Brewer (née Spalwit) (1974), Christine Horseman (1974) and Barbara Duckworth (1975). Because of the work load in the Department, Courtenay was able to get a fourth position for a technical officer, a position which was filled by Geoff Holloway in 1966 and later by Barry Day in 1978, when Geoff became Collection Manager of Entomology. This position was largely needed to assist with the numerous enquiries that arrived in the Department. Other staff working as research assistants, often on specific projects, included John Peters (1968), Margaret Schneider (1974), S.P. Kim (1974), Justine

O'Regan (1974) and Greg Daniels (1976). Mike Gray was appointed as assistant curator for Arachnology in 1968. The staff members in 1981 are shown in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. The Australian Museum Entomology Department staff in 1981. From left: David McAlpine, Barry Day, Deborah Kent, Geoff Holloway, Robyn Brewer and Courtenay Smithers.

Overall, there were far fewer staff at the Museum compared with the present institution and the workplace had a strong family atmosphere. The Director of the Museum at this time was John Evans, who was also an entomologist. Evans had a strong vision for development of research and exhibitions at the Museum and, under his leadership, the institution went on to become an internationally recognised force in the natural history sciences. This climate of cooperation and improvement was ideal for Courtenay and resulted in significant growth of the insect collections (including by public donations: e.g. Fig. 2) and improvement in the way they were housed (Britton 2011).

Courtenay also initiated the design of new modular cabinets for the collection (Britton 2011). He noted that one of the key design criteria was that the empty cabinet shell could be lifted by two average women, as Public Service regulations held that women on staff weren't allowed to lift above a certain weight. This is why Australian Museum cabinets have a somewhat unusual and elongate profile, with the drawers arranged in two tiers with each tier holding seven drawers.

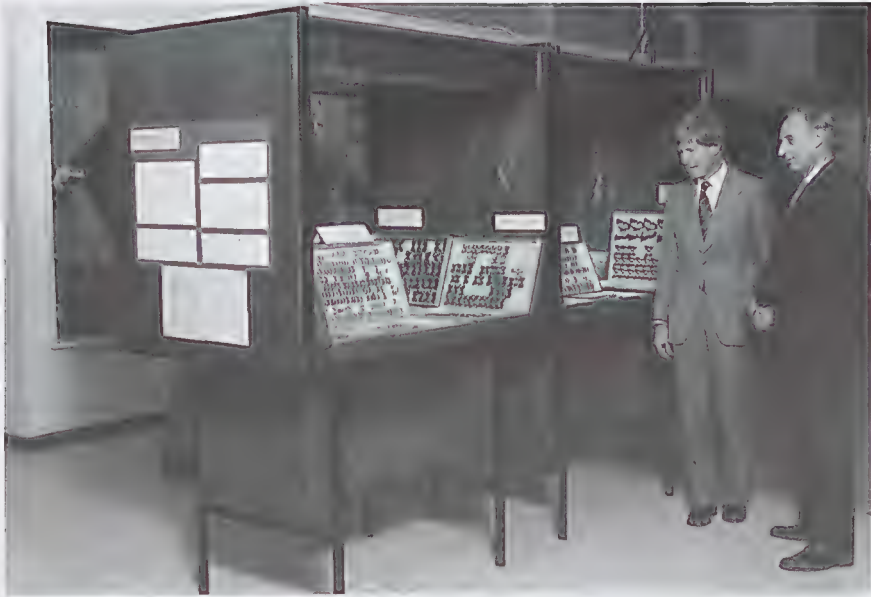


Fig. 2. Courtenay Smithers (right) at a function in the Australian Museum galleries in 1978 to receive the donated butterfly collection of David Rushworth (left).

One of the areas where development occurred was in field work. When Courtenay arrived at the museum there was only one Museum vehicle, which was a small delivery van. Shortly afterwards, the Museum managed to obtain a 4WD vehicle, which was probably a first for a museum in Australia. A collecting trip was planned for Cape York Peninsula and, fortunately for Courtenay, one of the occupants pulled out leaving space for him to go. He had only been in Australia for a few weeks and had no collecting equipment, so he had to rush to equip himself. The trip was hard work and they were away for almost three months. They followed the telegraph maintenance track, getting as far as the then flooded Archer River (Cogger 1961). Subsequent trips over the next few decades took him to Lord Howe Island, Norfolk Island, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and many other islands in the Melanesian arcs. He saw no boundary between work and the rest of life, so wherever he went he and his wife Smila collected. Indeed Smila was probably the more productive when it came to collecting.

From 1967 to 1970, Courtenay took on the role of Deputy Director at the Museum (Strahan 1979), plus running the Entomology Department and being Secretary for the International Congress of Entomology Organising Committee (Britton 2011). The work load and responsibility must have been tremendous and Courtenay recalled ‘I don’t know that I lost all my hair then but I certainly lost a lot of it. A lot of it went grey.’ The Deputy Director’s role was largely administrative and Courtenay felt that his skills as an

entomologist, including over 15 years of research on Psocoptera, were wasted in the Deputy Directorship. He characterised the administrative role as 'Here I am writing to the Public Works Department asking them to fix the toilets, when I have now arrived at the point where I can make a contribution (to the systematics of Psocoptera).' In 1970 he stepped down and continued on as Principal Curator until his retirement in 1985 (Britton 2011).

Courtenay's contributions to insect taxonomy are discussed by New (2012), but as well as publishing on Psocoptera, Neuroptera and Mecoptera he managed to cover a diversity of other topics relating to natural history. He published articles on all of the major insect Orders, covering topics such as conservation, behaviour, life history, ecology, economic entomology and taxonomy, as well as introductory manuals for insect study and collecting. A full list of refereed publications can be found in Britton (2011), with extra minor writings listed at the end of this volume. He was an early supporter of the *Australian Entomological Magazine* (now *Australian Entomologist*) when it was established by Max Moulds in 1974 and published many articles in this journal.

Exhibitions and Public interaction

One of Courtenay's early plans for the Museum was to prepare new insect exhibits to take advantage of the innovative skills of a young, talented and very active team working in Exhibitions and Preparation Departments at that time. It was not until the 1980s that this goal was achieved. The project team, consisting of a core of Courtenay, Bob Ross-Wilson, Roland Hughes and Janette McLeod, commenced meeting in late 1982. The development and construction took over two years, with the gallery opening in early 1985 with a total of 45 display cases featuring insects, spiders, worms, molluscs and other invertebrates (Fig. 3). Courtenay was charged with coordinating text content as well as helping source specimens, either through field work with Science and Exhibitions staff or by purchase from various specimen dealers. The project team meeting notes at the time detail just how many different people were drawn into the development of this gallery, including entomologists, arachnologists, collectors and natural historians such as Densy Clyne, Martyn Robinson, Glenn Hunt, David McAlpine, Mike Gray, Geoff Holloway and George Hangay.

Part of this gallery is still on display and it is still well utilised, as it represents one of the few places in Australia where you can see a comprehensive display detailing all of the insect orders present in Australia, along with appropriate scientific interpretation and, for many groups, real specimens. The gallery was also considered very advanced at the time, because it not only sought to outline the diversity of Australian insects and invertebrates but also had sections dealing with ecology, environment, behaviour, conservation, toxicology and other themes relating to these organisms.



Fig. 3. A case on cicadas from the new Australian Museum insect gallery opened in 1985. It showed how models, real specimens, photographs and dioramas could be combined with good scientific information to give a striking overall effect (Australian Museum photo).

Courtenay's research interests also expanded, including projects investigating butterfly migration, the results of which are discussed by Peters (2012). This project was notable in that it had a strong public involvement, with 'collaborators' from all over eastern Australia involved in both marking and recapturing butterflies. They remember it fondly and it helped network a large number of amateur enthusiasts, some of whom went on to become entomologists later in life. Shane McEvey recalls that because he was on Courtenay's file as a collaborator, it meant that even as a teenager from Melbourne he could visit Sydney, drop into the Museum and get to see the collection and talk to real scientists.

Courtenay's interest in migratory behaviour illustrated another facet of his personality that contributed to his success as a scientist and natural historian. He was a compulsive note taker and always jotted down details on insect, bird and other natural events around him. He knew that it was not possible to remember key details, such as the direction of a flight of butterflies, so all of this got recorded. For example, he recorded daily the birds at the feeder at his home in Turramurra.

Role in formation of the Australian Entomological Society

When Courtenay arrived in Australia from Rhodesia, he was surprised that there was no national society equivalent to the Entomological Society of Southern Africa and that there was no national forum for Australian entomology (Marks and Mackerras 1972, Britton 2011). His Director, John Evans, who was then the Australian representative on the Permanent Committee of the International Congresses of Entomology, supported the

view that a national body was needed and discussed this with Bruce Champ from the Entomological Society of Queensland (Marks and Mackerras 1972). Courtenay and Champ arranged a meeting of entomologists during the August meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in Sydney. It was attended by 30 entomologists and chaired by Courtenay. As recorded in Marks and Mackerras (1972), discussion was particularly vigorous and Courtenay somewhat fondly recalled one irate NSW supporter of 'State rights' referring to him as 'that bastard Smithers'.

Marks and Mackerras (1972) documented the subsequent formation of the Australian Entomological Society (AES). Courtenay regularly attended the AES conferences (Fig. 4), was very proud of his role in the Society's birth and was granted an Honorary Life Membership in 1983 (Britton 2011). He acted as inaugural Editor of the AES News Bulletin (now *Myrmecia*) from 1965-68 and was AES President from 1977 to 1980.



Fig. 4. At Mt Field National Park, Tasmania, on an outing from the annual conference of the Australian Entomological Society in 1985. From left: Margaret Schneider (UQ), Courtenay Smithers (AM), Tom Weir (ANIC), Greg Daniels (UQ) and Geoff Holloway (AM). All except Tom Weir had worked with Courtenay at the Australian Museum (Photo: Geoff Monteith).

Role in the 14th International Congress of Entomology, Canberra

Courtenay attended the International Congresses of Entomology held in 1964 in London and in 1968 in Moscow (New 2012) and dryly noted that he 'learnt how to run a congress' at the former and 'how not to run a congress'

at the latter. Courtenay and Doug Waterhouse (CSIRO Entomology) drafted a formal submission on behalf of the Executive of the AES to the Council of the Australian Academy of Science, requesting that the Academy issue a formal invitation in conjunction with the AES to the Permanent Committee of International Congresses of Entomology (Wharton and Marks 1968). The Academy agreed to be joint sponsor for the congress and Waterhouse was nominated to be the Australian representative on the Permanent Committee. An Advisory Committee was appointed by the Academy, with Courtenay as secretary to the Committee (Marks 1968). The recommendation that the 14th Congress be held in Australia was formally accepted by the Permanent Committee at the final plenary session of the Moscow Congress (Anon. 1968) and Courtenay became the Congress Secretary.

Much of the coordination of Congress, inviting speakers, drawing up a program, promotion of the Congress and many other tedious and detailed tasks, was done with the help of Smila. Courtenay set up a makeshift office in a tiny garden shed in the backyard of their home in Turrumurra for handling Congress communications. He sent out a first promotional Circular on the Congress to almost 10,000 recipients in early 1970, along with providing advertisements to the major journals such as *Nature* and *Science*. Regular updates on the progress of the Congress Committee were published in issues of the AES News Bulletin. By mid-1971, almost 1,800 delegates had given expressions of interest (Smithers 1971), all of whom received correspondence back from the Smithers' garden shed office. Courtenay shifted his office to Canberra in early 1972 to be closer to the rest of the Congress working group from CSIRO, Australian National University and other institutions in preparation for the final stages in organising the Congress, which ran in late August, 1972. A total of 1,323 attendees were present at the Congress, with 720 papers presented at over 21 Symposia (invited papers) and 15 Sections (submitted papers) (Smithers 1972).

Other interests

Before Courtenay and Smila left Rhodesia, they saw a Doberman bitch at an obedience trial and fell in love with the breed. They decided that when they got a dog it would be a Doberman. When they arrived in Australia, they discovered that there were very few examples of the breed in the country and it took a while to find a good one, but they eventually did. It was a characteristic of Courtenay that he never just dabbled with a new interest; he went in boots and all. He took a course on becoming a show judge for the Doberman breed and, when overseas on entomological business, managed to find time to visit Germany and talk to the German Doberman breeders. He ended up doing the commentary at the Royal Easter Show in Sydney for the Massed Obedience Display, which consisted of over 100 dogs in the arena at one time doing obedience trials. This drew upon his military background, as he had received training in radio broadcasting during WWII.

A similar result occurred when Courtenay started keeping bee hives in the backyard at Turrumurra. He tried them at Tuglo (see below), but they did not do well and died out. When Smila became sensitized to bee stings he set up his hives at his son's property near Wollombi, where they thrived. The honey was sold to a health food shop or used to "bribe" neighbours. As a result of his developing interest in this area, he published 'Backyard Beekeeping' (Smithers 1987), a popular guide which was updated and reprinted in 1992 and 2011 under different publishers. He regularly lectured to bee clubs and his phone number was listed as a catcher of feral bee swarms.

Courtenay loved classical music, which was always a loud accompaniment to his desk work at home. He played piano for relaxation and, as Smila recalls, 'whenever anything annoyed him he would take it out on the piano!'

'Tuglo', the family's nature retreat

In 1972, Courtenay and Smila purchased 'Tuglo', a largely forested 200 ha property on the southwestern slopes of Mt Royal, 36 km north of Singleton and not far from Barrington Tops. The property became a regular retreat for Courtenay and his family and he recalled spending 105 weekends there between August 1976 and April 1979 (Smithers 1981). He took an interest in almost all aspects of its natural history. He collected data on butterflies, birds and mammals on the property from 1972 onwards, as well as collecting various insects with Malaise traps and other methods. This resulted in some large collections of insects, which are held in the Australian Museum collections, as well as a series of papers on the ferns (Smithers 1978), birds (Smithers 1980), Papilionoidea (Smithers 1981), Megaloptera, Mecoptera and Neuroptera (Smithers 1993), Peripsocidae (Smithers 1994a) and HesperIIDae (Smithers 1994b).

Courtenay regularly referred to the property as 'Tuglo Wildlife Refuge' in print. Though it was always intended as a wildlife refuge and had National Parks signs declaring it was a wildlife sanctuary, the property was never formally gazetted as such. It was visited by many naturalists and natural history societies over the years, adding to Courtenay's own observations on its plants, birds and other wildlife. When the children, Graeme and Hartley, grew older they spent much time riding horses on the property and nearby ranges. Courtenay and Smila also planted South African proteas on the property. When their elder son, Graeme, graduated from his degree in horticulture, he purchased the adjacent property to set up a commercial flower farm growing proteas and other commercial species while living on Tuglo. Graeme has since retired from supplying flowers to florists but is still resident part-time on the property.

Retirement from the Museum

Courtenay retired at 60 in 1985 from his salaried position as Principal Curator. As with many other entomologists, Courtenay's retirement (Fig. 5)

from a paid position simply meant that he had much more time to get on with his entomological research without the interruptions of administration and other onerous tasks that come with paid work. He set up a lab on the back verandah of the house in Turrumurra and did most of his research work at home. He always came in to the Museum for one day each week, where he could access the research library and catch up with Museum life. He published over 80 refereed articles and books after retirement (Britton 2011) and continued his writing and research right up until his death on May 12th, 2011.



Fig. 5. Courtenay Smithers (centre) in retirement in 2006 with his wife Smila and Barry Day, assistant in entomology at the Australian Museum for many years (Photo: Max Moulds).

Acknowledgements

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